

NATION

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Getting a firsthand look at care of wounded troops

After Walter Reed scandal, legislators visit hospitals to ensure quality

BY MATTHEW HAY BROWN
[SUN REPORTER]

WASHINGTON // When Rep. Elijah E. Cummings visited the Baltimore Veterans Affairs Medical Center this week, he made sure to show up earlier than expected.

"I intentionally did that, because I know how when you announce these things, you get the dog and pony show," the Baltimore Democrat said.

He said the early arrival enabled him to speak with several patients before he sat down with hospital administrators on Monday. He came away impressed with the dedication of the staff and quality of the facility. But said he's concerned about how the hospital will fare if there is an increase in the numbers of soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious injuries.

Cummings is not alone. While Congress holds hearings on conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, senators and congressmen are fanning out to Veterans Affairs hospitals around the country, getting firsthand looks at the long-term care and treatment received by the nation's wounded soldiers.

In Maryland, Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest, Republican of the Eastern Shore, has been following cases at Perry Point VA Medical Center. He's planning a return visit to the facility this month. Rep. John Sarbanes, a Baltimore Democrat, has set aside time to tour the Baltimore VA Medical Center. And Democratic Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski has pressed military commanders for better coordination between the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration on care for the seriously injured.

"Yes, we can look at Walter Reed," Mikulski said last week at a



Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski seeks better coordination on care for the seriously injured. Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest says he is particularly interested in conditions in private homes contracted by the Veterans Affairs Department to take in disabled veterans.

[GETTY IMAGES (MIKULSKI)]; [SUN PHOTO (GILCREST)]



Senate hearing. "Then, where do they go to rehab? And then, when they leave rehab, where do they go from there? Are they going to go into nursing homes? Are they going to go into assisted living? Or if they get home health care, who's going to help the families, these 19-year-old brides, with assistance with living for a guy who might have 40 percent of his brain shot off or no arms or no legs and the stress on the family?"

The scrutiny follows revelations, reported last month by *The Washington Post*, of poor conditions and inadequate services at Walter Reed. Congress is holding hearings; the commander of Walter Reed, the Army surgeon general and the secretary of the Army have already lost their jobs.

Congress also has been spurred by constituents, who are calling to talk about their experiences

with military health care.

"I would expect that members are going to be getting more complaints," Sarbanes said. "When this kind of stuff gets in the news, people who might let something go are rightly emboldened to present their case."

Sarbanes, a member of the House Government Reform Committee, has been organizing his fellow freshmen to visit Walter Reed. He is also planning to tour the VA hospital in Baltimore. He says he is visiting both facilities with an open mind.

"It's important for us to be very careful in terms of where we direct the criticism," he said. "We have to be aggressive in determining whether people who we're asking to be there for the veterans when they came home are being asked to do that without proper resources."

"What I'm going to be looking at is how we trace this back," he said. "What are the origins of why the service wasn't provided? Is it trouble navigating the bureaucracy? Is it the absence of proper resources that are available to help people come through the system and to process things quickly. Is it because somebody got the contract to provide that service and they're not doing their job?"

Gilchrest, a former Marine who was treated at Walter Reed in 1967 after he was shot in the chest in Vietnam, said the reports of mold and rodents at Building 118 served as a wake-up call for Congress.

"That was an indicator. That was a marker," he said. "What else is problematic? And we're going to continue to pursue that, from the care they get on the operating table to moving to the various levels of treatment until they get transferred home and then follow-up care."

Gilchrest said he is particularly interested in conditions in private homes contracted by the Veterans Affairs Department to take in disabled veterans.

"We want to ... see how clean they are, how effective they are, and do they give good care," he said.

Cummings was at a field hearing of the House Armed Services Committee at Walter Reed last week when it occurred to him there was a VA hospital less than five minutes' drive from his Baltimore home. He's encouraging his colleagues to visit facilities in their districts as well.

"If all of us did the same thing, that would give us full coverage for the country," he said.

"We want to go out and help these people," Gilchrest agreed.

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